

Correcting Some Misconceptions about St. Augustine's Sex Life

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Augustine, Everyman, Adam. This secret identity governs the subtle development of the *Confessions*.¹

FOR ABOUT twenty-five years I have been writing about and teaching courses in the philosophy of sexuality.² During that time I have frequently lectured about the philosophy of Augustine along with the sexual views of his predecessor Paul, his contemporary Jerome, and his successor Thomas Aquinas. In these lectures, before getting on to Augustine's theology of sexuality (for example, that Adam's prelapsarian erection would have been under his voluntary control; that the passionate, troubling, disobedient sexual impulses we experience in our postlapsarian existence are part of the punishment visited on humankind by God; that sexual activity between married spouses, if done for its own pleasurable sake and not for procreation, is a sin but forgivable), I provide a short outline of Augustine's life: his early allegiance to

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¹Robert J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 186.

²See, for example, my *Sexual Investigations* (New York, 1996) and *Pornography, Sex, and Feminism* (Amherst, N.Y., 2002). Some of my published essays in the philosophy of sex can be accessed at www.uno.edu/~asoble.

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Manichaeism; his living with a woman and having a child with her out of wedlock; his reputation for having been sexually promiscuous; his intellectual turmoil over the Problem of Evil; his conversion to Christianity; and his subsequent life as bishop of Hippo.

In a recent course (summer 2001) an unprecedented event occurred: a student raised her hand at the end of the biographical sketch I provided of Augustine and offered to the class the “fact” that in addition to having been promiscuous with women Augustine had had sexual relations with men. Because I had, in my study of Augustine, never come across this contention, I was incredulous, not fully believing my student but also embarrassed: had I been, for years, leaving out an important biographical fact? I requested the source of my student’s information and was shown a 1999 human sexual psychology textbook. The author, Bruce M. King, stated in the briefest possible terms that Augustine “had a mistress and a son at an early age and continued to have numerous sexual affairs into his early thirties, including some with male friends (Boswell, 1980).”³ I was intrigued by this declaration of Augustine’s “sexual affairs” with men, especially since it was attributed to John Boswell’s respected *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.⁴ The author of this psychology textbook did not supply any page numbers in Boswell’s book, so I went through *CSTH*, which I had read with delight once before, searching for Boswell’s assertion of Augustine’s “sexual affairs” with “male friends.” I found only two passages in the book, discussed below, relevant to whether Augustine ever had same-sex sexual experiences. Neither justified citing Boswell to support that claim.

Note that my question is whether Augustine ever had sexual relations with men or whether there is any good evidence that he did. That is, I am not concerned with making claims about Augustine’s “sexual orientation” or with whether it is accurate to talk about Augustine as “bisexual” or “homosexual,” whatever those vague terms mean. Thus I do not get involved in questions about the social construction of (homo)sexuality. This is why, in what follows, I restrict myself to speaking, in a positivist way, about “same-sex” sexual acts instead of “homosexuality” in either an essentialist or social constructionist sense (although the scholars I discuss often do use the terminology I eschew).⁵ In this essay I argue that there is no evidence that Augustine ever had same-sex sexual relations.

³*Human Sexuality Today*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 1999), 11.

⁴*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1980). Hereafter cited as *CSTH*.

⁵A useful text on the essentialism versus social constructionism debate is Edward Stein, ed., *Forms of Desire* (New York, 1992). My own brief writings on the topic are in *Sexual Investigations*, where I argue against constructionism regarding the “sexual” (122–27) but suggest it is right about “sexual health” (143–74). See also my *Philosophy of Sex and Love: An Introduction* (St. Paul, Minn., 1998), 14–19.

BOSWELL PASSAGE NUMBER 1

It is not surprising that Augustine, having grown up in and retired to rural North Africa, where homosexuality was probably clandestine and publicly denigrated, should have considered it bizarre and alien. It is striking that the major treatment of homosexual relations per se in his writings occurs in his description of his first sojourn in a great city, where he abandoned himself to urban pleasures with an enthusiasm he was later to regret bitterly. (*CSTH*, 151)⁶

Yes, Augustine traveled to a “great” city, the Roman-controlled Carthage (now in Tunisia), not far across the Mediterranean Sea from Sicily. Augustine, born (354) and raised in the small town of Thagaste (or Tagaste, now Souk Ahras, in Algeria), went to Carthage in 371 at the age of seventeen to study. Carthage was a multicultural, bustling metropolis, offering many urban diversions and pastimes. It was a “wicked” place,⁷ a “tumultuous city—[a] city of study and of favourite jockeys, of ecstatic yet obscene religion and of dance-girls, captured gorillas whom they took for savage women, sea-monsters exhibited as mermaids, and philosophy.”⁸ Boswell writes that in Carthage Augustine “abandoned himself to urban pleasures with . . . enthusiasm.” But Boswell does not state that Augustine engaged specifically in same-sex sexual activity. (“Homosexual relations” is his phrase in the paragraph; Boswell is not a constructionist.) Nor is that implied by Boswell’s implicit sociological observation that “homosexuality” (his word) is more frequent in big cities than small towns. And why should a youth who considered it “bizarre and alien” suddenly “abandon” himself to it? In Carthage there were plenty of other “urban pleasures” in which Augustine might have indulged: sex with the dance-girls, provocative religious discussions, visits to

⁶When Boswell writes that “the major treatment of homosexual relations per se in [Augustine’s] writings occurs in his description of his first sojourn in a great city,” he is probably referring to *Confessions* 3.8. There Augustine writes, “[T]hose sins which are against nature, like those of the men of Sodom, are in all times and places to be detested and punished. Even if all nations committed such sins, they should all alike be held guilty by God’s law which did not make men so that they should use each other thus. The friendship which should be between God and us is violated when that nature . . . is polluted by so perverted a lust” (*Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed [Indianapolis, Ind., 1993], 43). All passages in the *Confessions* I quote are from Sheed, unless indicated otherwise.

⁷Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* (Westport, Conn., 1970), 255. “Wicked,” like Hamburg’s Freiheit district and the French Quarter of New Orleans: “Courtesans from Egypt and voluptuous Numidian girls walked invitingly through the streets. Places of amusement held out the prospect of wild revelries. And mimes of all sorts blared out the promises of the crudest sort of entertainment” (René Fülöp-Miller, *The Saints that Moved the World* [New York, 1945], 100).

⁸C. C. Martindale, “A Sketch of the Life and Character of St. Augustine,” in M. C. D’Arcy et al., *St. Augustine* (Cleveland, 1957), 79–101, at 89–90. For more on Augustine’s Carthage, see Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), 6, and Louis Bertrand, *Saint Augustin* (New York, 1941), 73–74.

the sea-monster exhibit. Augustine emphasizes that he was fascinated by Carthaginian theater.⁹ Note that the question for now is not whether Augustine ever had sexual encounters with boys or men; it is whether Boswell supports that claim. The first passage from *CSTH* doesn't do it.

It is actually striking that Boswell does not state in this passage that Augustine engaged in same-sex sexual acts in Carthage as part of abandoning himself to urban pleasures. One point of *CSTH* is that prior to the time of Aquinas (ca. 1250) same-sex sexual relations were relatively tolerated, compared with contemporary times. If so, then probably during the early period of Christianity more men, both within and outside the Church, engaged in same-sex practices than has been recognized by historians and other scholars. Indeed, it is a useful rhetorical tactic of scholars of gay history to mention by name the illustrious men and women through the centuries who engaged in same-sex relations in order to demonstrate that some who have made distinguished contributions to science, art, literature, and politics were "gay" or "bisexual." If Boswell believed he had good evidence that Augustine, an influential religious and political figure, had "sexual affairs" with "male friends," Boswell would have emphasized that fact. But Boswell's passage number 1 asserts only that Augustine indulged in "urban pleasures" in Carthage. What Boswell does not say in this passage might be more revealing than what he does say.

Similarly, in a paragraph in which it would have been pertinent to mention the same-sex affairs of Augustine, if any, Boswell merely says, without naming anyone at all: "Not only does there appear to have been no general prejudice against gay people among early Christians; there does not seem to have been any reason for Christianity to adopt a hostile attitude toward homosexual behavior. Many prominent and respected Christians—some canonized—were involved in relationships which would almost certainly be considered homosexual in cultures hostile to same-sex eroticism" (*CSTH*, 135).

The historian Keith Thomas complains about *CSTH* that Boswell "rightly castigates those earlier scholars who shamefacedly concealed the evidence of past homosexuality when they met it. But he occasionally succumbs to the opposite tendency, which is to find it everywhere."¹⁰ But, as I am arguing, Boswell did not find it "everywhere." In particular, he did not claim to find same-sex sexual relations in Augustine.

⁹"I developed a passion for stage plays" (*Confessions* 35; 3.2). Like those of Shakespeare, Pinter, and Mamet, Carthaginian plays were provocative: "Courtesans, libertines, rakes, deceivers, dupes, and parasites, match-makers and procurers were the heroes and heroines; adultery and seduction of innocent girls, betrayal of brothers and friends, contempt for ethics and morals, and jeers and jibes at the gods were the content of these plays" (Fülöp-Miller, 101). By the time Augustine was bishop of Hippo, twenty-five years later, "the theatres no longer attract[ed]" him (*Confessions* 201; 10.35).

¹⁰"Rescuing Homosexual History," *New York Review of Books*, December 4, 1980: 26-29, at 29.

Thomas's example of where Boswell overstepped is Boswell's "theory" that "Anselm discouraged severe legislation against homosexuals because [Anselm] had 'gay' proclivities." But Boswell's discussion of Anselm's sexuality is clearly undecided (see *CSTH*, 215–19). Nor does Boswell state his "theory" about Anselm dogmatically: "Anselm's reservations about publishing the [1102 Council of London] prohibition [of sodomy] were partly due to his realization that its stipulations regarding the degradation of clerics violated the papal decree of Leo IX forbidding extreme measures of this sort in dealing with homosexuality among the clergy, but he may also have had personal reasons for suppressing the . . . decree" (*CSTH*, 215–16). This is hardly a case in which Boswell "succumbs to the opposite tendency."

Nor did Boswell succumb to that tendency regarding Augustine. Consider a claim Boswell makes in a footnote in his later book, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*: "St. Augustine's relationship with a concubine lasted fifteen years, and was the sole serious erotic commitment of his life, although he did regard a particular [male] friend as his 'alter ego' (described in *Confessions* 4)."¹¹ Boswell would have written here that Augustine had erotic contact with his male friend if he thought it had occurred. The point Boswell makes in this note is that during his life Augustine was emotionally close to at least two people: his mistress,¹² with whom he had a long sexual relationship, and a male friend. But a cautious Boswell does not state here, even though Augustine was close to this male friend, that their relationship included sexual activity.

Similarly, consider what Boswell writes in another footnote in *Same-Sex Unions*. The word "brother" (in Latin, *frater*), Boswell writes, had been "an obvious term of affection between men: St. Augustine used it of Alypius, with whom he lived for most of his adult life. . . . There is no reason to assume that the relationship was erotic, and also *no reason to presume* that it was not."¹³ Again, Boswell does not claim that Augustine engaged in sexual activity with this male friend—he leaves the question entirely open. Note, however, that Boswell is wrong in stating that we have "no reason

¹¹*Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1994), 31n11. About these two relationships, André Gide wrote: "Do you suppose it was harder for St. Augustine to aspire to God because he had first given his heart to a friend, whom he loved as much as he ever loved a woman?" (*Corydon* [1925; reprint, Urbana, Ill., 2001], 122). We can grant that Augustine loved his male friend dearly without conceding that they were sexual lovers.

¹²Should we call her Augustine's "mistress," "concubine," or "significant other"? Carolinne White, sounding a tolerant, contemporary note, describes her as Augustine's "partner" and even puts that word in Augustine's mouth when translating *Confessions* 4.2: "[S]he remained my only partner" (*The Confessions of St. Augustine* [Grand Rapids, Mich., 2001], 9, 30). I prefer to say, avoiding the linguistic tangle, that Augustine and this woman lived together, engaged in sexual relations, and were not married. This is all I mean by "mistress."

¹³*Same-Sex Unions*, 182n101, emphasis added.

to presume” that the relationship between Augustine and Alypius was not erotic. We have *some* reason for that presumption, because in the *Confessions* Augustine wrote that Alypius “was quite extraordinarily chaste. Early in adolescence he had had the experience of sexual intercourse, but it took no hold upon him. Indeed he regretted having done it and despised it and from then on lived in complete continence” (101; 6.12). If we believe Augustine (as Boswell does elsewhere) that Alypius lived in complete continence, then Augustine and Alypius could not have had sexual relations.¹⁴ Further, the sentence in the *Confessions* in which Augustine calls Alypius “brother” (“I remember too how You subdued my heart’s brother Alypius to the name of Jesus Christ Your only-begotten son” [154; 9.4]) hardly suggests that Augustine used “brother” about Alypius in an erotic sense.

BOSWELL PASSAGE NUMBER 2

Saint Augustine . . . expressed the love he felt for a friend of his youth, whose death so desolated him that he was driven to God in unbearable pain: “For I felt that my soul and his were one soul in two bodies, and therefore life was a horror to me, since I did not want to live as a half; and yet I was also afraid to die lest he, whom I had loved so much, would completely die” (*Confessions* 4.6). Unlike many of his Christian contemporaries, Augustine bitterly regretted the sexual aspect of such passions (“Thus I contaminated the spring of friendship with the dirt of lust and darkened its brightness with the blackness of desire,” 3.1) and rejected as an adult the possibility of licit homosexual relationships. (*CSTH*, 135)

Boswell might be taken as saying that Augustine, when a young man, had a (one, not “some”) male friend whom he loved deeply and erotically. But Boswell does not state that Augustine and his friend engaged in sexual activity. Boswell says that Augustine “regretted” that “passions” for a friend (who?) have a “sexual aspect,” but the fact that love for a friend has a sexual “aspect” does not mean that sexual activity occurred between them. Further, when Augustine says, in the sentence quoted by Boswell from *Confessions* 3.1, that he “contaminated” (some) friendship with “lust” and “desire” (*concupiscentia* and *libido* are his words),¹⁵ this still does not mean that any sexual acts occurred between Augustine and his friend. One reason is that Augustine uses these words to refer to

¹⁴Alypius, who was later to be bishop of Thagaste, “was much attached to me because he thought me kindly and learned, and I to him because of the great bent towards virtue that was so marked in him so young” (*Confessions* 94; 6.7). See O’Connell, 93.

¹⁵The Latin is from www.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/, the Web site of James J. O’Donnell.

sexual desires or feelings, that is, to psychological states, not to actions.¹⁶ Thus there is no evidence from Augustine's remark in *Confessions* 3.1—a section I examine closely below—that he engaged in sexual acts with this friend. Augustine as a youth was emotionally sensitive, and merely to experience sexual *feelings* (arousal, desire, or attraction) might have caused him psychological distress and induced him to believe (perhaps too self-critically) that he had “contaminated” friendship by having these feelings, even if no sexual activity, not even the slightest sexual touch, occurred. According to Garry Wills, “the expectation of sexual excess in Augustine's life leads people to add sexual scenes and themes to his story—incestuous feelings for his mother or homosexual feelings for his friend.”¹⁷ Yes, but to add “homosexual” feelings to Augustine's life adds little of interest. Many people have such feelings (for better or worse); the question before us is whether Augustine acted on them: “sexual affairs” is our topic. If such feelings are nearly ubiquitous, and if their existence in a person is sufficient for his having a homosexual or bisexual orientation, then most of us are “gay.” So be it, but that's irrelevant.

The main point, however, about passage number 2 from Boswell's *CSTH* is that it is badly constructed: *Confessions* 4.4–4.6 and *Confessions* 3.1 deal with entirely different matters. It was misleading for Boswell to have merged these two sections in the same paragraph of *CSTH*. Boswell's relying on *Confessions* 3.1 to illuminate 4.4–4.6 or using 3.1 to suggest that the friendship Augustine speaks of in 4.4–4.6 was sexual (if that is what Boswell was doing) is unconvincing.¹⁸

In *Confessions* 4.4–4.6 Augustine relates that from Carthage he visited his home town of Thagaste to do some teaching. He tells us about a young man he had known in Thagaste when he used to live there and with whom he eventually developed a close friendship. “It had become a friendship very dear to us, made the warmer by the ardor of studies pursued together” (*Confessions* 54; 4.4). This friend died in 376, when Augustine was twenty-two. In *Confessions* 4.4–4.6 Augustine recounts his sadness over the loss of this friend. For example, “[m]y heart was black with grief. . . . My eyes were restless looking for him, but he was not there. . . . I had no hope of bringing him back to life, nor for all my tears did I ask for this: simply I grieved and wept. For I was in misery and had

¹⁶See Augustine's 413–26 *City of God*: “[L]ust' [*libido*] . . . is the generic word for all desires [*cupiditatis*]” (trans. Marcus Dods [New York, 1993], 464; 14.15; see 14.16). The Web site Bibliotheca Augustana, www.fh-augsburg.de/~harsch/aug_0000.html, provides a Latin text of *City of God*.

¹⁷*Saint Augustine* (New York, 1999), xvii.

¹⁸James J. O'Donnell, in his commentary on Augustine's Latin text (*Augustine's Confessions* [Oxford, 1992], 2:110), writes that on p. 135 of *CSTH* (passage number 2 above) Boswell is “uncharacteristically reticent” about Augustine's sexuality yet “takes” *Confessions* 3.1 “as hinting at homosexual acts.” *Augustine's Confessions* is on O'Donnell's Web site.

lost my joy. . . . I was wretched, and every soul is wretched that is bound in affection to mortal things: it is tormented to lose them" (55–56).¹⁹ Nothing in these sections of the *Confessions* suggests that the friendship Augustine had with his male friend had a sexual "aspect" (say, desire or attraction), let alone that they engaged in sexual activity. Joseph McCabe writes, regarding this portion of the *Confessions*, that "[a]bout a year after his return to Thagaste he lost his most intimate friend. The youth had studied with him, and had been converted by him to Manicheism. . . . The beautiful passage in which Augustine expresses his grief thirty years afterwards reveals a singularly deep affection."²⁰ Of course, we should not conclude from "deep affection" that the relationship was sexual.²¹ Peter Brown has remarked that Augustine craved the physical presence of his friends.²² ("My eyes were restless looking for him.") This common feature of friendship provides no evidence of either same-sex feelings or activity. Michel de Montaigne's language in describing his relationship with Étienne de La Boétie is at least as powerful as, if not more powerful than, Augustine's, yet we do not usually imagine that Montaigne and his friend engaged in sexual activity.²³ Only someone who fell head first into Keith Thomas's "succumbs" error would insist that we do so.

By contrast, the passage Boswell quotes from *Confessions* 3.1 deals with something else: Augustine's experiences in Carthage in 371. It was sloppy for Boswell to juxtapose these two parts of the *Confessions*, as if what Augustine thought while witnessing and enjoying the "urban pleasures" of Carthage had significance for his friendship in Thagaste. There is no reason to read Augustine's reference to his contaminating friendship with lust (3.1) to be a comment made by Augustine about the particular friendship he writes about later (4.4–4.6). Let us, then, look at *Confessions* 3.1 itself:

¹⁹That "every soul is wretched that is bound in affection to mortal things" is why Augustine, in part, urged that we love only God. See William S. Babcock, "Cupiditas and Caritas: The Early Augustine on Love and Human Fulfillment," in William S. Babcock, ed., *The Ethics of St. Augustine* (Atlanta, 1991), 39–66.

²⁰*St. Augustine and His Age* (New York, 1903), 68.

²¹"There is no justification for putting only the worst possible construction on this friendship—as some writers have done" (John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: An Introduction to the Confessions of St. Augustine* [London, 1954, 1980], 86). Nor is there any justification for putting the *best* "possible construction" on it by calling it "gay." If historians want to show that eminent persons have been gay, lesbian, or bisexual, they should mention only cases for which the evidence is strong. Playing the boy who cried wolf by packing the list with dubious names weakens the credibility of the project. On a similar problem in feminist readings of Francis Bacon, see my "In Defense of Bacon," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25, no. 2 (1995): 192–215; revised version in Noretta Koertge, ed., *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths about Science* (New York, 1998), 195–215.

²²Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, 1969), 161. On this phenomenon, see David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), book 2, part 2, section 4 (1968 printing, 353).

²³"On Affectionate Relationships" (sometimes translated "On Friendship"), in *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. M. A. Screech (London, 1991), 205–19.

I came to Carthage, where a cauldron of illicit loves leapt and boiled around me. I was not yet in love, but I was in love with love, and from the very depth of my need hated myself for not more keenly feeling the need. I sought some object to love, since I was thus in love with loving. . . . My longing then was to love and to be loved, but most when I obtained the enjoyment of the body of the person who loved me.

Thus I polluted the stream of friendship with the filth of unclean desire and sullied its limpidity with the hell of lust. . . . And I did fall in love, simply from wanting to. . . . I was loved, and our love came to the bond of consummation: I wore my chains with bliss but with torment too, for I was scourged with the red hot rods of jealousy, with suspicions and fears and tempers and quarrels. (35)

Several things emerge from this passage. Augustine reports, in the first sentence, that in Carthage he found himself in a “cauldron” (or “frying pan”) of lust. But Augustine does not proceed to tell us that he jumped into this cauldron. Indeed, Augustine reveals in the following sentences that he was looking for love (*amor*). He candidly admits that this love would include sexual relations. It is right here that Augustine berates himself for “polluting” love or friendship (*amicitia*) with sexual desire. (Notice how Augustine in *Confessions* 3.1 equates love and friendship.)²⁴ Augustine then says he was successful in his search: “I did fall in love.” He concedes that at its beginning not all was well in this relationship. This is not unusual. Passionate relationships, as blissful as they can be, are often perturbed by jealousy, fear of loss or abandonment, and quarrels. Augustine seems quite ordinary in this experience. Nothing in *Confessions* 3.1 is obviously about same-sex sexual desire or activity. To read it that way is a stretch, one that reveals more about the reader’s expectations and hopes (or fears) than about Augustine’s behavior or feelings.

What about that one provocative line? Here are five translations of it, along with the important sentence that precedes it:²⁵

My longing then was to love and to be loved, but most when I obtained the enjoyment of the body of the person who loved me. Thus I polluted the stream of friendship with the filth of unclean desire and sullied its limpidity with the hell of lust. (Sheed)

²⁴See Gerald W. Schlabach, “Friendship as Adultery: Social Reality and Sexual Metaphor in Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Augustinian Studies* 23 (1992): 125–47, at 141n14. P. A. Brunt points out the common equivalence of *amor* and *amicitia* in “*Amicitia* in the Late Roman Republic,” in Robin Seager, ed., *The Crisis of the Roman Republic: Studies in Political and Social History* (Cambridge, 1969), 199–218, at 204, 201n5, citing J. Hellegouarc’h, *Le Vocabulaire latin des relations et des partis politiques sous la République* (1963), 146 ff.

²⁵The Latin, from O’Donnell’s Web site, is “amare et amari dulce mihi erat, magis si et amantis corpore fruerer. venam igitur amicitiae coinquinabam sordibus concupiscentiae candoremque eius obnubilabam de tartaro libidinis.”

To love and to have my love returned was my heart's desire, and it would be all the sweeter if I could also enjoy the body of the one who loved me. So I muddied the stream of friendship with the filth of lewdness and clouded its clear waters with hell's black river of lust. (R. S. Pine-Coffin)²⁶

To love and to be loved was sweet to me, and all the more when I succeeded in enjoying the person I loved. I befouled, therefore, the spring of friendship with the filth of concupiscence, and I dimmed its lustre with the hell of lustfulness. (J. G. Pilkington)²⁷

It was very pleasurable to me, both to love, and to be loved; but much more, when I obtained to enjoy the person whom I loved. I defiled therefore the spring of friendship with the filth of uncleanness, and I besullied the purity of it with the hell of lustfulness. (William Watts)²⁸

To love then, and to be beloved, was sweet to me; but more, when I obtained to enjoy the person I loved. I defiled, therefore, the spring of friendship with the filth of concupiscence, and I beclouded its brightness with the hell of lustfulness. (Edward Bouverie Pusey)²⁹

The provocative line about friendship's being "polluted" by lust immediately follows Augustine's declaration that he was looking for love in Carthage, a love that would include having access to his beloved's body. "So" or "thus," says Augustine, he muddied love or friendship with a desire for sexual pleasure. The context of this admission provides no reason to think that Augustine in this sentence was confessing to same-sex "affairs." First, Augustine was looking for and talking about love with a woman, for he immediately says that success in his search soon came, and he was probably referring to the pact he made with his mistress. Second, Augustine speaks in this sentence only of desire, not behavior. Augustine knew Matthew 5:28 well, according to which Jesus said, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Augustine's taking Matthew 5:28 seriously might very well explain his critical remark in *Confessions* 3.1 that he "polluted" friendship with sexual desire, for the point of Matthew 5:28 is that mere desire by itself, without sexual activity, is condemnable.³⁰

²⁶*Confessions* (New York, 1961), 55.

²⁷*The Confessions*, in Whitney J. Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine* (New York, 1948), 1:29.

²⁸*St. Augustine's Confessions* (London, 1960), 1:99.

²⁹*The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (New York, 1949), 36.

³⁰Augustine cites Matthew 5:28 when conjecturing the nature of sexuality for prelapsarian Adam and Eve: "Away, I say, with the thought, that before there was any sin, there should already have been committed regarding that fruit the very sin which our Lord warns us against regarding a woman: 'Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.' As happy, then, as were these our first parents, who were agitated by no mental perturbations, and annoyed by no bodily discomforts, so

I suspect that when Augustine writes that lust had an unwanted effect for him, that it “polluted” love or (the stream, spring, or pulse [*venam*]) of friendship,³¹ he means that, according to his philosophical notions, the ideal love relationship would be based on or constituted by friendship, and its sexual aspect would be of secondary or no significance. Robert O’Connell quotes this supportive passage from Augustine’s 389–391 *De vera religione*: “Whoever loves another as himself ought to love that in him which is his real self. Our real selves are not bodies. . . . Human nature is to be loved . . . without any condition of carnal relationship.”³² Peter Brown observes that Augustine “presented sexual intercourse [between prelapsarian Adam and Eve] as secondary to friendship. In Paradise, Adam and Eve had been what he himself had once so dearly wished to be. Friendship, and not sexual desire, had set the pace of their relations.”³³ There was, further, Augustine’s sexual psychology, part of which undoubtedly came from Monica, his devoutly Christian mother. When Augustine was young, Monica had instilled in him a sharp uneasiness about sexuality, “warn[ing] him against dealings with women.”³⁴ Nevertheless, Augustine found himself, while in Carthage, ignoring both his philosophical ideas and his mother’s demands, and for that he felt ashamed. In *Confessions* 3.1, Augustine is scolding himself for allowing sexual desire to intrude into the friendships or love relationships with women (or a woman) that he thought he wanted to form or was beginning to form in Carthage. Indeed, his long affair with his mistress seems to have been motivated, at its inception, by sexual desire, lacking a foundation in friendship: the relationship with his mistress was a “mere bargain of lustful love” (*Confessions* 52; 4.2).³⁵ Augustine was, by his own standards, a failure,

happy should the whole human race have been, had they not introduced that evil which they have transmitted to their posterity” (*City of God* 456–57; 14.10).

³¹In this “pollution” of love by lust, is there a trace of residual Manichaeism in Augustine?

³²*Augustine Confessions* 111; ellipses are O’Connell’s. See also Augustine’s 384 *Soliloquia*: “[W]hat is not loved in its own right is not loved” (quoted by Babcock, 44).

³³*The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), 402. See also Wills, 21, 66.

³⁴Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 38; see Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York, 1988), 122–23.

³⁵This is not to say that Augustine didn’t eventually come to cherish his mistress. As a result of arrangements made by Monica, “[s]he with whom I had lived so long was torn from my side as a hindrance to my forthcoming marriage. My heart which had held her very dear was broken and wounded and shed blood. . . . Nor was the wound healed that had been made by the cutting off of my former mistress. For there was first burning and bitter grief; and after that it festered, and as the pain grew duller it only grew more hopeless” (*Confessions* 103; 6.15). If Augustine’s attachment to his mistress were merely sexual, we would not expect such grief (which is reminiscent of *Confessions* 4.4–4.6). Augustine loved “his mistress passionately, for her beauty perhaps, or perhaps for her goodness of heart, or both” (Bertrand, 122). But, according to James A. Brundage (*Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* [Chicago, 1987], 100), Augustine “says nothing to indicate that there was any deeper emotional bond between him and his mistress than a keen desire for

and he loudly admits it.³⁶ This provocative sentence is an example of the self-criticism to which the older Augustine, in his more mature years when he wrote the *Confessions* (397–98), was prone.

I conclude that no support for Augustine's having "sexual affairs" with "male friends" is derivable from Boswell, neither from *CSTH* nor from *Same-Sex Unions*, and not (so far) from Augustine's *Confessions*. Hence the psychology textbook doubly misled its student readers about both Boswell and Augustine. But others have claimed or hinted at same-sex sexual behavior on Augustine's part. One is Rebecca West, who writes in *St. Augustine*:

[D]uring boyhood the Christian influence had not much power over Augustine. He himself says that this period was full of abnormal depravity, particularly during his sixteenth year, which he had to spend at home. . . . But it is quite possible that this is a distortion of fact due to the excessive development in him of the sense of guilt. . . . *Certainly* he confesses to homosexual relationships *in a sentence* which, with characteristic insight, puts its finger on the real offense of homosexuality, by pointing out that it brings the confusion of passion into the domain where one ought to be able to practice calmly the art of friendship.³⁷

We know, from what West has written earlier, that she is referring to the *Confessions*. But West fails to reveal the book and chapter of the sentence in which Augustine "certainly . . . confesses to homosexual relationships." She does not even bother to *quote* the sentence. Maybe she has in mind the provocative sentence in *Confessions* 3.1 we examined above,³⁸ for in that sentence Augustine says that sexual desire can "pollute" friendship. But

sexual gratification." Augustine supports Brundage's reading when he writes, "What held me so fiercely bound was principally the sheer habit of sating a lust that could never be satisfied" (*Confessions* 102; 6.12). Yet Augustine's language in *Confessions* 6.15 shows that his mistress had a deeper emotional significance for him. Further, a relationship of that duration was probably not held together solely by mutual sexual desire: "It was a strange lust that was faithful for fourteen years," writes an incredulous Kim Power (*Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women* [New York, 1996], 98). For an account of the relationship between Augustine and his mistress that is much opposed to Brundage's and treats the matter in more convincing detail, see Power, 96–104. Power argues that Augustine, after dismissing his mistress, unhappily "discovered that he had not chosen virtue over lust, but pragmatic ambition over love" (102). See also O'Meara, 129; Bertrand, 185–86; and John J. Hugo, *St. Augustine on Nature, Sex, and Marriage* (Chicago, 1969), 175–77.

³⁶See Wills, 21.

³⁷*St. Augustine* (Chicago, 1982), 33, emphasis added.

³⁸In the fourth edition of his psychology textbook, King (*Human Sexuality Today* [2002], 13) jettisons his reliance on Boswell's *CSTH*. To support his claim that Augustine had "sexual affairs" with men, he instead quotes Augustine, but only the one provocative line of *Confessions* 3.1, taken out of context.

sexual feelings insinuating themselves into love or friendship can occur indiscriminately in relationships between men and women, men and men, and women and women, and it is likely that Augustine recognized that simple fact. Indeed, that sentence in the context of the rest of *Confessions* 3.1 seems to imply that Augustine was talking about his search for a love-sex relationship with a woman. So that sentence is not one in which Augustine “certainly . . . confesses to homosexual relationships” and not even to same-sex sexual feelings. Further, it is an old idea—which we can attribute, not unjustly, to Augustine—that sexuality (say, Platonic *eros*) is self-seeking and aims at physical contact, while love or friendship (say, Aristotelian *philia*) is at least in part directed at the good of the other and aims at discourse. So sexuality and friendship are in interesting ways incompatible.³⁹ For Augustine, friendship between men and women might well have been difficult to establish or maintain because sexual tension could be expected to arise. (Prelapsarian Adam and Eve were friends, but their sexuality, for Augustine, lacked the powerful passion of an *eros*. Consider, too, Mary and Joseph, whose marriage, for Augustine, was an asexual friendship.)⁴⁰ Two men could easily be friends, then, because their relationship would less likely be threatened by sexual undercurrents. This does not mean that for Augustine men and women could not be friends. What it means is that friendship between them is possible only if they are able to attenuate any sexual attraction they might feel for each other⁴¹—a possibility less realistic after the fall, when concupiscence becomes powerful and hence made nearly postlapsarianly impossible precisely by God’s punishment. (Indeed, that for men and women lust interferes with friendship is part of the punishment.) This understanding of Augustine, that lust “polluted” love or made friendship less probable, implies precisely that Augustine was talking about relationships with women. Rather than “certainly . . . confess[ing] to homosexual relationships,” Augustine in *Confessions* 3.1 is doing exactly the opposite: he “confesses” that regarding women, his sexual desire interfered with his forming or maintaining friendships.⁴²

How did West go astray? Supposing that West had *Confessions* 3.1 in mind, Wills writes: “Since Augustine says he polluted *amicitia* . . . West assumed that Augustine had a homosexual affair with an *amicus*. But there

³⁹See Gilbert Meilaender, “When Harry and Sally Read the Nicomachean Ethics: Friendship between Men and Women,” in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *The Changing Face of Friendship* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1994), 183–96.

⁴⁰See Elizabeth A. Clark, “‘Adam’s Only Companion’: Augustine and the Early Christian Debate on Marriage,” *Recherches Augustiniennes* 21 (1986): 139–62.

⁴¹See Power, who cites *De bono conjugali* 3, 6, and 16 and *Soliloquia* 1.13.22 (105).

⁴²“*The Confessions* makes clear that in his youth, Augustine could not reconcile the claims of friendship with sexual desire,” writes Clark (141). She also claims that Augustine was unable to do so all the way to the point of his conversion (142). Perhaps, perhaps not, depending on how we understand the development of his relationship with his mistress (see above, n. 35).

is no reason to think *amicitia* could not refer to heterosexual love. Augustine described the past of Adam and Eve as an *amicalis* benevolence.⁴³ Wills does not tell us where in Augustine we can find this *amicalis*. Peter Brown does: “Augustine was adamant that Eve had used no sexual attraction to lure Adam to eat the fatal fruit: he had eaten with her *amicali benevolentia*, ‘out of the good nature of a friend,’ so as to share her life at all times and in every way” (Brown cites *De genesi ad litteram* 11.42.59).⁴⁴ There is also a revealing passage at the very beginning of Augustine’s *On the Good of Marriage*:

Forasmuch as each man is a part of the human race, and human nature is something social, and hath for a great and natural good, the power also of friendship [*amicitiae*]; on this account God willed to create all men out of one, in order that they might be held in their society not only by likeness of kind, but also by bond of kindred. Therefore the first natural bond of human society is man and wife. Nor did God create these each by himself, and join them together as alien by birth: but He created the one out of the other, setting a sign also of the power of the union in the side, whence she was drawn, was formed. For they are joined one to another side by side, who walk together, and look together whither they walk. Then follows the connexion of fellowship in children, which is the one alone worthy fruit, not of the union of male and female, but of the sexual intercourse. For it were possible that there should exist in either sex, even without such intercourse, a certain friendly [*amicalis*] and true union of the one ruling, and the other obeying.⁴⁵

We can plausibly take Augustine in the first two sentences to be asserting the friendship of Adam and Eve, and Augustine repeats *amicalis* in the last line.⁴⁶ Thus, *amicitia* in *Confessions* 3.1 does not imply that Augustine was thinking about same-sex relationships.

Augustine’s equation of love (*amor*) and friendship (*amicitia*) in *Confessions* 3.1 is also pertinent. Augustine says that his lust interfered with love and friendship, using both *amor* and *amicitia*. Since love for Augustine could be between a man and a woman, it seems to follow from the equivalence that Augustine thought the same thing about friendship. Even if Augustine might sometimes refer only to men in one sense of *amicitia* (say, Cicero’s), there is also a sense of *amicitia* in Augustine,

⁴³Wills, 21.

⁴⁴Brown, *The Body and Society*, 402.

⁴⁵The Christian Classics Ethereal Library, trans. C. I. Cornish, www.ccel.org (click on Church Fathers) or www.ccel.org/fathers2 (click on Volume III). The bracketed Latin is from *De bono conjugali* in the *Patrologia Latina* database, pld.chadwyck.co.uk.

⁴⁶On this passage, see Clark, 152.

interchangeable with *amor*, in which it is used more generally to refer to relationships between women and men.⁴⁷ (*Amicitia* can be as broad as the Greek *philia*, referring to all sorts of loves, friendships, and affections.) The appearance of *amicitia* in the provocative sentence of *Confessions* 3.1 is, however, merely a conspicuous red herring, for 3.1 contains only one use of the word *amicitia* but at least a dozen uses of *amor*, *amare*, and their congeners. Clearly, Augustine's emphasis is on the "pollution" of love (*amor*) by sexual desire.

Maybe West did not have in mind that sentence in *Confessions* 3.1 but certain passages in *Confessions* 2, because it is in that earlier book that Augustine relates the events of his sixteenth year, the year West seems to be describing. So here are some passages from book 2:⁴⁸ "I propose now to set down my past wickedness and the carnal corruptions of my soul. . . . Arrived now at adolescence I burned for all the satisfactions of hell, and I sank to the animal in a succession of dark lusts" (*Confessions* 23; 2.1). That comes at the very beginning of book 2 and is too vague for anyone to conclude that Augustine "certainly . . . confesses" to have engaged in same-sex sexual activity. Augustine goes from this right on to chapter 2, in which he expresses ideas similar to those he expresses in 3.1 (again mixing together *amor* and *amicitia*):

My one delight was to love and to be loved. But in this I did not keep the measure of mind to mind, which is the luminous line of

⁴⁷Brunt displays part of a poem (#109) written by Catullus to his beloved Lesbia (Clodia), in which Catullus uses *amicitia*: "ut liceat nobis tota perducere vita aeternum hoc sanctae foedus amicitiae" (204). In an essay that refers to many male-male friendships, and this is the only male-female relationship mentioned, Brunt presents the example without blushing or raising an eyebrow—as if *amicitia* could of course be used of a man and a woman.

⁴⁸Before we leave the third book of the *Confessions*, let's examine one more passage: "I wasted myself in baseness, pursuing a sacrilegious curiosity which led me once I had deserted You to the uttermost treason and the deceiving service of devils, to whom I made offering of my vile deeds. . . . I dared so far one day within the walls of Your church and during the very celebration of Your mysteries to desire and carry out an act worthy of the fruits of death" (37; 3.3). There is hardly any limit on what we can imagine Augustine desired and did in the Lord's church on that day; too many things would count equally, for the older Augustine, as being "worthy of the fruits of death." Surely, though, Augustine does not here "certainly" confess to "homosexual relationships." Did Augustine, in the style of the brash Alexander Portnoy, commit a sacrilegious act by masturbating in a dark corner of the church? Did he—pushing to the limit the evil of the pears episode (*Confessions* 2.4–2.10)—vandalize holy objects? Your guess is as good, or as bad, as mine. Peter Brown reads the passage tamely: "A stranger from the provinces, he would, of course, go to church to find a girl-friend, much as another stranger, the Genoese, Christopher Columbus, will meet his wife in Seville Cathedral" (*Augustine of Hippo*, 41). But Brown's interpretation doesn't tally with Augustine's strong self-rebuke, that he did something deserving of death. Going "to church to find a girl-friend," to meet someone, as if attending a church-sponsored singles gathering, does not deserve death, not even for the older Augustine.

friendship; but from the muddy concupiscence of the flesh and the hot imagination of puberty mists steamed up to becloud and darken my heart so that I could not distinguish the white light of love from the fog of lust. Both love and lust boiled within me, and swept my youthful immaturity over the precipice of evil desires to leave me half drowned in a whirlpool of abominable sins. . . . I was tossed about and wasted and poured out and boiling over in my fornications. (*Confessions* 23; 2.2)⁴⁹

I sympathize with Augustine that he could not more sanguinely handle the ubiquitous human problem of not always being able to distinguish lust from love and for finding himself mixing the two together in his emotions and behavior.⁵⁰ Here Augustine does speak about action: “my fornications” apparently refers to behavior. (We cannot conclude that “abominable sins” in

Another possibility, suggested by Wills (17; see Power, 97; O’Meara, 55), is that Augustine went to church with his beloved and proposed there that she be his mistress. This might explain Augustine’s self-rebuke, for though concubinage was permitted by Roman law and Augustine’s level of commitment to Manichaeism, such a relationship was condemned by his later Christianity (see Power, 104–5; Peter Brown, “Introduction” to the Sheed translation of the *Confessions*, ix–xxvi, at xv; and *Confessions* 10.30). I find it implausible that Augustine in *Confessions* 3.3 is speaking about forming a pact with his mistress. If that is what had occurred, Augustine likely would have said so, for he is otherwise not reluctant to tell us the embarrassing details (in his eyes) of his relationship with his mistress. Augustine’s extreme secrecy here is telling.

Brown’s more recent opinion, expressed in a review of Wills’s *Saint Augustine* (“A New Augustine,” *New York Review of Books*, June 24, 1999: 45–50), is based on a January 404 sermon of Augustine’s that was discovered in 1990: “With these words, the veil of reticence with which Augustine had covered the incident in the *Confessions* is lifted. . . . Now we know: The Feast of Saint Cyrian had been, for our young hero, his Woodstock and, who knows, his singles’ bar” (47). What did Augustine write in this sermon about a feast that occurred in the early 370s? “When I went to vigils as a student in this city, I spent the night rubbing up beside women, along with boys anxious to make an impression on the girls, and where, who knows, the opportunity might present itself to make it with them” (47). Augustine was not rubbing indiscriminately against the buttocks and thighs of both boys and girls but specifically, he says, against females. But this playful behavior—like that which goes on in the packed French Quarter of New Orleans during Mardi Gras—hardly seems to deserve the stern self-rebuke of *Confessions* 3.3. And why would Augustine make this tiny admission in a sermon delivered in 404 but withhold it, just a few years earlier, from the *Confessions*?

Furthermore, Brown’s translation of the sermon differs markedly from that of Edmond Hill (which Brown cites in the second edition of his *Augustine of Hippo* [2000], 477n57; see also 456–57): “I as a lad used to attend vigils when I was a student in this city, and I kept vigil like that, all mixed up together with women, who were subjected to the impudent advances of men, which no doubt on many occasions put the virtue of even chaste people at risk” (*The Works of Saint Augustine, III/11: Newly Discovered Sermons* [Hyde Park, N.Y., 1997], 333). In Hill’s translation, Augustine makes no admission that he too did some rubbing.

⁴⁹O’Donnell thinks that West had in mind this passage from *Confessions* 2.2 instead of 3.1 (109).

⁵⁰See Clark, 141. In addition to Meilaender’s “When Harry and Sally Read the Nicomachean Ethics,” see also the hilarious “How to Tell Love from Passion,” in James

the passage refers to behavior, because the sins described in Matthew 5:28, for example, are not behavioral.) Regardless, this evocative passage is too vague to give us reason to conclude that Augustine is speaking about sexual desire or acts "polluting" same-sex friendships.⁵¹ Further, smack in the middle of *Confessions* 2.2 Augustine quotes Paul, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Corinthians 7:1), and he bemoans: "I should have listened more closely to *these* words and made myself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven" (24). But Paul had also written, a few lines earlier, and surely Augustine knew this, that "[n]either . . . male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders . . . will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Augustine neither quotes this passage nor bemoans that he should have listened more closely to these words.

At the end of *Confessions* 2.2, Augustine confesses again to something or another: "Where then was I . . . in the sixteenth year of my life . . . when the madness of lust . . . took complete control of me, and I surrendered wholly to it?" (24). Such a thing could be said by or about any healthy youngster ("Augustine, Everyman") who is suddenly attacked by hormones and who, as a result, finds himself pursuing females ad libitum—especially if this young man had been instilled with guilt and dread about sexuality by his mother and who later recounts his discomfiting sixteenth year from the wise perspective of his more perfect adult Christian life. When Augustine says that he "surrendered wholly" to his lust, he might have meant only that he found himself masturbating, a sexual practice that would have riled the feathers of the older Augustine as much as fornicating with females. We still have no evidence that Augustine's lust caused him to engage in same-sex sexual activity; we can't even begin to put together a case for that conclusion. We should take seriously that Augustine in the *Confessions* "used language so vehement and sombre in speaking of his misdeeds, that he is often awarded a larger amount of wickedness [or sexual heroism!] than he is probably entitled to."⁵² If Augustine, in repenting, did exaggerate his early wickedness, that provides reason to think he would have readily admitted to same-sex sexual encounters, as mild as they might have been. Yet Augustine, contrary to West, never explicitly says any such thing.

Thurber and E. B. White, *Is Sex Necessary?* (New York, 1929), 62–78. For a humorless treatment by two contemporary analytic philosophers, see J. Martin Stafford, "On Distinguishing between Love and Lust," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (1977): 292–303, and, in reply, A. H. Lesser, "Love and Lust," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 14, no. 1 (1980): 51–54.

⁵¹Augustine was also concerned with the similarity of sexuality and friendship, not only with sex infecting friendship. "All human relationships" for Augustine, "even the noblest of friendships, are capable of transmitting original sin. For if the potential for using the other instrumentally is nowhere clearer than in the sexual act, nowhere is it clearly absent either" (Schlabach, 133). Søren Kierkegaard, too, objected to erotic love and friendship; both, through self-interest and preference, excluded agape (*Works of Love* [New York, 1964], 65, 67, 74).

⁵²McCabe, 39. See also Bertrand, 63, and Fülöp-Miller, 99 ("pitiless self-criticism").

In *Confessions* 2.3 Augustine becomes less vague about the sexuality of his sixteenth year;⁵³ what he writes strongly suggests that his sexual desires and actions were for and with females: “I still remember [my mother’s] anxiety and how earnestly she urged upon me not to sin with women, above all not with any man’s wife. All this sounded to me womanish and I should have blushed to obey. . . . I . . . went headlong on my course, so blinded that I was ashamed among the other youths that my viciousness was less than theirs” (25).⁵⁴ Monica, Augustine’s Christian mother, is portrayed by Augustine as entreating her son not to fool around sexually with girls and, especially, with those who were married. Augustine reports that he “went headlong on my course” anyway, despite his mother’s admonitions, implying that “his course” was to fool around sexually with girls.⁵⁵ Near the end of *Confessions* 2.2 Augustine remarks, and laments, “My family took no care to save me from this moral destruction by marriage” (24)—by the Pauline mechanism of *ad remedium concupiscentiae*. This, too, implies that Augustine’s faulty behavior, at least in his mother’s mind, consisted of sexual acts with females.⁵⁶ Further, Augustine’s father, Patricius, saw his son’s “excesses as a proof of manhood, the sowing of wild oats.”⁵⁷ While “Patricius

⁵³That Augustine is sometimes vague about his sexuality should not make us complain, merely on the grounds that Augustine is not as candid as Jean-Jacques Rousseau or a host of twentieth-century loquacious sexual confessors (Anka Radakovich and Catherine Millet come to mind). We are blessed to have Augustine’s *Confessions*: “Of all the writers of the Early Church, Augustine is the only one whose past sexual activity is known to us” (Brown, *The Body and Society*, 388; see also his *Augustine and Sexuality* [Berkeley, 1983], 2). About all we know, for example, of Augustine’s contemporary and nemesis, Jerome, is that as a teenager he went to Rome to study and (like Augustine in Carthage?) “fell into sin” in a city that “offered . . . the customary temptations” (John Gavin Nolan, *Jerome and Jovinian* [Washington, D.C., 1956], 2).

⁵⁴That Monica’s warning “sounded to me womanish and I should have blushed to obey” is odd, given Craig A. Williams’s observation about the Romans: “[A] man labeled as effeminate might . . . be represented as pursuing sexual relations with women, either in a generally unrestricted way or specifically by pursuing such inappropriate women as other men’s wives. . . . [T]hese insults are hurled with never a hint of surprise at the combination of effeminacy and heterosexual behavior” (*Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* [New York, 1999], 143). Perhaps Williams’s remark is not meant to apply to Africans or to teenagers instead of men.

⁵⁵“As a sceptical teenager [Augustine] used occasionally to attend church services with [Monica], but found himself mainly engaged in catching the eye of the girls on the other side of the basilica,” writes Chadwick (10–11). I wonder how Chadwick knows this detail; it is not mentioned by Augustine in the *Confessions*.

⁵⁶A passage in *Confessions* 2.3 supports this argument: Monica “had urged me to chastity . . . and though she saw my sexual passions as most evil now and full of peril for the future, she did not consider that if they could not be pared down to the quick, they had better be brought under control within the bounds of married love. She did not want me married because she feared that a wife might be a hindrance to my prospects” (26).

⁵⁷Alban Goodier, “St. Augustine of Hippo,” in F. J. Sheed, ed., *Saints Are Not Sad: Forty Biographical Portraits* (New York, 1949), 42–56, at 44.

looked on with joy and pride, Monica [looked on] with horror and fear."⁵⁸ His father's exuberant pride in Augustine's youthful sex life would hardly be expected if Augustine were fooling around sexually with guys, and Patricius knew it.

By the way, a bit later in the *Confessions* Augustine explains why it took him a long time to accept the Christian God: "The plain truth is that I thought I should be impossibly miserable if I had to forego the embraces of a woman" (*Confessions* 100–101; 6.11).⁵⁹ As Henry Chadwick makes the point, "Could he bring himself to live without a woman?"⁶⁰ This sounds like the plight of a confirmed, if not addicted, erotic lover of women. It was not a desire for same-sex affairs (which Augustine says are also incompatible with following God [*Confessions* 3.8; see note 6]) that made Augustine procrastinate or postpone his decision to convert, a decision that involved wholesale changes in his life, but the extraordinarily sweet attractions to him of the sexual embraces of a woman. That trifle is the competition with which Augustine's God had to contend.

C. C. Martindale's account of Augustine's life hints at same-sex sexual activity on Augustine's part. About Augustine's sixteenth year, Martindale writes: "During that year Augustine lived at home, and it was the fatal year, he reckons, the year during which he initiated himself into *every* immorality. . . . [S]omething must have happened to him to make him think very ill of his adolescent years. What had happened was, quite simply, that they were very bad."⁶¹ Martindale cannot really mean *every* immorality. After all, Augustine did not kill his father during his sixteenth year, nor did he engage in coitus with his mother. Augustine does write, "I foamed in my wickedness, following the rushing of my own tide, leaving You and going beyond *all* Your laws" (*Confessions* 24; 2.2, emphasis added). But neither can we take Augustine's "all" literally, and so we have no justification for supposing same-sex erotic activity to have been included, even if Augustine did some truly "very bad" things in his sixteenth year.

Martindale seems to insist otherwise. Although he doesn't claim explicitly that Augustine engaged in same-sex sexual activity, what he proceeds to say is thick with innuendo. Martindale brushes off the notion that in his sixteenth year Augustine committed "mere trivial sensual slips."⁶² But the only evidence he provides for rejecting this sober view is autobiographical: "After speaking with much friendliness to certain young Southerners ["Africans" and "Latins"] whom I esteem, I have been amazed by the precocity,

⁵⁸Fülöp-Miller, 99.

⁵⁹See also *Confessions* 129; 8.1: "But what still held me tight bound was my need of woman."

⁶⁰Chadwick, 25; see O'Connell, 90–93; O'Meara, 169–71.

⁶¹Martindale, 88–89, emphasis added.

⁶²Martindale, 89.

frequency, and versatility of their sexual experiments.”⁶³ Martindale wants us to understand the young African Augustine of the fourth century C.E. the same way, as being sexually precocious and versatile, and perhaps by “versatile experiments” Martindale is thinking of same-sex encounters. But, if so, the argument is a superb combination of anachronism, overgeneralization, and stereotyping.

Louis Bertrand, too, thinks we can learn something from Augustine’s ethnicity: “Young Africans develop early, and the lechery of the race is proverbial. . . . Let us not try to make it [*Confessions* 3.1] clearer than he has left it himself. When one thinks of all the African vices, one does not dwell on such avowals.”⁶⁴ This stereotyping of “the race” is no better than Martindale’s innuendo. Similarly, there is little reason to accept John O’Meara’s view: “We can hardly go far wrong in taking it that he both disobeyed Monica’s injunctions about his relations with women, and also allowed himself such other practices, including, possibly, relations with those of his own sex, as were freely condoned by pagans in antiquity.”⁶⁵ That “pagans” in general condoned and performed same-sex sexual acts (if true) provides no reason for thinking that the “pagan” Augustine in particular did so. (Recall Boswell’s claim that “homosexuality” in northern Africa was “clandestine and publicly denigrated” and that it was, for Augustine, “bizarre and alien.”) Augustine, of course, “possibly” engaged in same-sex sexual activity when young, as O’Meara says, but to arrive at that thin, nearly tautologous conclusion we do not need to invoke pagan practices in antiquity. A Boswellian “no reason to presume” that he didn’t would do just as well.

Another scholar worth discussing is Marjorie Garber, who writes, in her massive, wide-ranging book *Vice Versa*, that

The bisexual ’zine *Logomotive: A Magazine of Sex & Fun (From a Bisexual Perspective)* offered a page of “bisexual lists,” including some seventy-five “famous bisexuals,” listed alphabetically from (perpetual favorite) Alexander the Great to (perpetual favorite) Virginia Woolf, including Lord Byron, Queen Christina of Sweden, Ram Dass, Freddie Mercury, Sappho, and St. Augustine. A footnote in small type noted, “The list of bisexual figures is arbitrary. These are people who were known to have relationships with people of genders other than their own, as well as their own.”⁶⁶

Garber herself does not claim that Augustine was bisexual, in this passage or elsewhere in her book; she is just reporting that the magazine *Logomotive* included Augustine on its list of famous bisexuals. But Garber’s reproduc-

⁶³Martindale, 89.

⁶⁴Bertrand, 63–64.

⁶⁵O’Meara, 48.

⁶⁶*Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York, 1995), 54.

ing the list without questioning its veracity contributes to wrong or unsupported views about Augustine (and the others). Scholars in all fields—psychology, history, theology, philosophy, and so forth—have a responsibility to avoid statements that might provoke other authors or students into believing or making unjustified assertions.⁶⁷

Note what *Logomotive* (which has been ominously renamed, after its first three issues, *Slippery When Wet*) says: the people on the list “were known” to have had “relationships” both with the same sex and the other. Does “relationship,” for the magazine, necessarily imply “sexual”? What type of involvement is required for one to be “bisexual”? Are feelings and attractions enough? Is this how Augustine made it onto the list? It would be ideal to consult that issue of *Logomotive* to find out on what evidence it included Augustine as bisexual. I could not get a copy or the information from Professor Garber,⁶⁸ but I did find a *Logomotive* Web site. I sent e-mails to a contact person at the magazine on July 11 and 12, 2001, asking if I could obtain *Logomotive*'s bisexual list and the references given in the article. I received a negative response to both requests. *Logomotive* is not a scholarly journal, but a pop-culture magazine and might not have provided evidence for including Augustine, or anyone else, on its bisexuals list.⁶⁹ The magazine may have been repeating popular misconceptions about Augustine, the very gossip we are here investigating, or was guilty of the error mentioned by Keith Thomas: it “succumb[ed] to the . . . tendency” of seeing bisexuality everywhere.

Several Web sites similarly claim that Augustine was “gay.” The site Integrity/Virginia, which “worship[s] in witness to the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia and the gay and lesbian community” and which is hosted by the Church of St. Clement in Alexandria, lists Augustine on its “gay saints” page.⁷⁰ The uncritical browser is bound to be misled. The historian Paul Halsall maintains a Web site that lists Augustine on its “Calendar of Lesbian,

⁶⁷See my “Bad Apples: Feminist Politics and Feminist Scholarship,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 29, no. 3 (1999): 354–88, especially section 3, 362–66.

⁶⁸This is the reference Garber supplies (533n58): “*Logomotive: A Magazine of Sex & Fun (From a Bisexual Perspective)*, 3 and 40.” Missing are the magazine's volume and issue numbers and its year of publication. I sent Garber an e-mail message on July 6, 2001, and a snail letter on July 20, 2001, asking her to look at her copy of the magazine and let me know on what basis *Logomotive* included Augustine. Garber never replied to these messages. She did reply to an e-mail message I sent on March 13, 2002, but did not answer my original question.

⁶⁹According to information provided on the Web site, the issue of *Logomotive* (number 3) that listed the bisexuals included “How R. Crumb Taught Me the Facts of Life; Is Your Brain Queer? . . . ; Bad Girls in the Movies; Passing, Packing and Pissing . . . ; interview with Jerod Pore, publisher of *Factsheet Five Electric; Fruitless Flirtations*; famous bisexual people, movies, comics and science fiction.” The Web site's material is restricted (like pornography): one must assert one's legal age and, after paying a fee (say, by a First Virtual account), one gets a password to access the pages. See www.best.com/~slippery/18/buy/previous.html.

⁷⁰www.integrityva.org; www.integrityva.org/gay_saints.htm.

Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Saints.”⁷¹ (The Integrity/Virginia site merely repeated, and abbreviated, what it found on Halsall’s site.) Halsall quotes three passages from the *Confessions* in support of including Augustine: 3.1 and 4.4, which we have already considered, plus 4.6—here his argument seems to be that Orestes and Pylades, whom Augustine mentions while reporting his reactions to the death of his beloved friend, “were famous homosexual lovers.” But *Confessions* 4.6 does not indicate that Augustine and his friend were involved sexually:

I was wretched, yet I held my wretched life dearer than the friend for whose loss I was wretched. For although I would have liked to change the unhappiness of my life, yet I was more unwilling to lose my life itself than I had been to lose my friend; and I doubt if I would have been willing to lose it even to be with him—as the tradition is, whether true or false, of Orestes and Pylades, who wanted to die for each other and both together, because for either life without the other was worse than death. But in me there was an odd kind of feeling, the exact opposite of theirs, for I was at once utterly weary of life and in great fear of death. (56)

Halsall’s argument depends on the assumption either that Orestes and Pylades were “famous homosexual lovers” (which is contentious) or that Augustine believed them to be “homosexual lovers” (for which there is no evidence, at least not in the *Confessions*). Further, what Augustine is doing in *Confessions* 4.6 is contrasting his relationship with his friend and the relationship between Orestes and Pylades; Augustine emphasizes that he was not willing to die for his friend. If anything, this passage points in the opposite direction from Halsall’s conclusion. Since Augustine and his friend were not like Orestes and Pylades in this respect, there is reason to think that they were not like Orestes and Pylades in other respects.⁷²

It is also questionable how much “fornication” Augustine engaged in with women during his life. His detractors (including himself) and those who enjoy broadcasting the purported hypocrisies of religious authorities can be expected to exaggerate the extent of Augustine’s “womanizing” or “whoremongering” before his conversion to Christianity. Consider,

⁷¹www.bway.net/~halsall/lgbh/lgbh-gaysts.html. (The link was dead in July 2002, but I can’t imagine that such an elaborate and sophisticated Web site will be down for very long.) See also Halsall’s Web site People with a History: An Online Guide to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans* History, at www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/index.html.

⁷²O’Donnell lists a few others who have attributed homosexuality to Augustine based on *Confessions* 2.2 or 3.1, including “W. Achelis, *Die Deutung Augustins* (Prien am Chiemsee, 1921), . . . G. Papini, *S. Agostino* (Florence, 1930), 40ff, and . . . J. Dittes” (109–10). I have not consulted the German and Italian books, but I did look at James F. Dittes, “Continuities between the Life and Thought of Augustine,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5,

though, what John T. Noonan Jr. says about Augustine: “[F]rom eighteen to twenty-nine, Augustine had lived with a girl he would not marry. By her he had a son. . . . Throughout the eleven-year period the union was a stable one, and Augustine was faithful to this one woman.”⁷³ Augustine writes in the *Confessions*, “I took one woman, not joined to me in lawful marriage. . . . Yet I had but that one woman, and I was faithful to her” (52; 4.2). Given Augustine’s account of his inordinately lustful nature, this was an accomplishment; as Kim Power says, “Augustine’s continence [while he lived with his mistress] in a promiscuous world was remarkable.”⁷⁴ If Augustine had cheated on his mistress, his penchant for candid self-criticism, I think, would have led him to admit it. But Augustine would not repeat the behavior of his father, who cheated on his mother.⁷⁵ “You made [Monica] beautiful to her husband, respected and loved by him and admirable in his sight. For she bore his acts of unfaithfulness quietly, and never had any jealous scene with her husband about them” (*Confessions* 162; 9.9).

If Augustine was sexually faithful during this period (other scholars believe Augustine and agree with Noonan and differ only about the length of time Augustine and his mistress were together),⁷⁶ then any (other) sexual activity with women Augustine engaged in during his life would have had to occur before he was seventeen, as a teenager in Thagaste or while at school in Madaura, and/or at the age of seventeen or eighteen, early during his “sojourn” in Carthage, before he made a pact with his mistress, and/or after he was thirty, until he was thirty-two or thirty-three, when

no. 1 (1965): 130–40. Dittes writes: “[S]ome have seen running through the *Confessions* a persistent thread of homosexuality (as in II, 2; III, 1; IV, 4). Although the evidence for this is not overwhelming, it would be consistent with an assumption of a close, early and lasting attachment with his mother” (134). I found it amazing that a book by a gay scholar with the portentous title *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Jonathan Dollimore; Oxford, 1991) does not even hint that Augustine was “gay” or “bisexual” and restricts itself to calling Augustine a “sinner turned saint” (141).

⁷³*Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 125.

⁷⁴Power, 98; see also Bertrand, 122.

⁷⁵See Pagels, 122; O’Meara, 35; Fülöp-Miller, 95; and Clark, 158. There are interesting parallels with the life of Kierkegaard: “Kierkegaard’s journals contained repeated allusions to his youthful sexual misconduct”; “the sins that preoccupied Kierkegaard were very much related to the sexual and marital transgressions of his father” (Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* [Albany, N.Y., 1992], 282n37, 200).

⁷⁶Wills (xvii) and Martindale (90) give a figure of fifteen years, as do Boswell (*Same-Sex Unions*, 31, 110) and Brown (*Augustine of Hippo*, 39). Boswell probably took his figure from Brown; see his citation of Brown in *Same-Sex Unions*, 110n10. But Brown’s chronology in his 1969 *Augustine of Hippo* doesn’t square with his own fifteen-year figure: he says (38–39, 62–63) that the relationship began in 371 or 372 and ended in 385, which is a thirteen- or fourteen-year period. In his later 1988 *The Body and Society* (389), Brown claims only thirteen years, as he does in his 1993 introduction to the Sheed translation of

he was baptized (in 387) by Ambrose. Book 2 of *Confessions* suggests that Augustine engaged in sexual activity with girls as a teenager. But then, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, Augustine was suddenly sexually monogamous with his mistress. This is why Peter Brown writes sympathetically that Augustine was “a young man who had cut the ebullience of his adolescence dangerously short.”⁷⁷ And in the brief period after the relationship with his mistress ended and his baptism, Augustine apparently had only one sexual affair. At that time, he says, “I was simply a slave to lust. So I took another woman” (*Confessions* 103; 6.15). Wills points out that “[i]t [was] characteristic [of Augustine] that he did not resort to promiscuity, but to another sole concubine.”⁷⁸ Thus, if we count his mistress and this other woman, Augustine had two sexual relationships in his early thirties, which makes doubtful the psychology textbook claim that Augustine “continued to have numerous sexual affairs into his early thirties.”⁷⁹ Some people succumb to a tendency to find promiscuous heterosexual relations everywhere.

Here, then, are my tentative, even if prosaic, conclusions about Augustine’s sex life. The evidence that Augustine engaged in same-sex sexual activity is missing or underwhelming. He probably engaged, as do

the *Confessions* (xv), which is consistent with his earlier chronology. (In his 1983 *Augustine and Sexuality*, Brown says “nine years” [2], while in his 1999 review of Wills’s book [“A New Augustine,” 45], he again says about fourteen years: “From 371 to 385, as a student and young professor, Augustine lived with a concubine.”) Power waffles: twice she says it lasted fifteen years (94, 104) and once fourteen (98). Both Warfield (255) and McCabe (40) assert that the relationship lasted fourteen years, while Uta Ranke-Heinemann (*Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven* [New York, 1991], 78) opts for twelve; Hugo (175, 176) twelve; Chadwick (10) “over thirteen”; O’Meara (55) “upwards of fifteen years”; Bertrand (122) “more than ten years”; Fülöp-Miller (115) “more than sixteen years”; and Clark (141, citing Emile Schmitt) for “perhaps fifteen years.” If Brown is right that the relationship between Augustine and his mistress went from 371 or 372 to 385, how Noonan came up with the low figure of eleven years is a mystery. But Noonan is not alone. Like Noonan, Sheed claims that the relationship began when Augustine was eighteen (*Confessions* 49, 85) and ended when Augustine was twenty-nine, an eleven-year period, yet Sheed also says (49) that the relationship lasted fifteen years. Go figure. Finally, consider Brundage: “When he was about sixteen Augustine had taken a concubine with whom he lived for about fifteen years” (99). For Brundage, the relationship lasted fifteen years because he posits that it began before Augustine went to Carthage in 371. This seems also to be the basis of Wills’s claim of fifteen years (17). Yet in *Confessions* 3.1 Augustine says that he was (still) looking for love in Carthage. Maybe the matter is resolved by contrasting the duration of their “relationship” and how long they “lived together.” But it does show that there are problems (including the repetition of *Confessions* 2.2 in 3.1), due to Augustine himself, in getting the chronology of the *Confessions* right.

⁷⁷ *Augustine of Hippo*, 39.

⁷⁸ Wills, 41.

⁷⁹ See n. 3 above and the text.

many boys, in sexual relations with females while he was a teenager and before he began living with his mistress. I suspect that Augustine's description of his youthful sinfulness (*Confessions* 2) exaggerates the extent of his teenage sexual activity, even if his mental life was dancing with lust. Augustine then spent about a dozen years living with one woman. And he probably had only one other sexual affair before his conversion.⁸⁰ Augustine lived the rest of his life, forty-three years, until he died at the age of seventy-six (in 430), without any sexual activity at all. By today's Western cultural standards, even by enlightened (non-Augustinian) Christian standards, in his sex life Augustine was fairly typical and presents little that can be harshly condemned.⁸¹ Augustine was "Everyman" at least, even if he was not also the "Adam" who combined friendship and sexuality.

⁸⁰Robert Trevas, Arthur Zucker, and David Borchert (*Philosophy of Sex and Love* [Upper Saddle River, N.J.], 31) claim that "[i]n a remarkable conversion scene . . . in the *Confessions* . . . we are told how [Augustine] finally gained the strength to sever his ties with his mistresses." (Mistresses?) This was not Augustine's point at all. He ends the account of his conversion experience with the jubilant "You converted me to Yourself so that I no longer sought a wife" (147; 8.12). What did Augustine turn down as a result of his conversion? A married sex life with a teenage girl less than half his age. This is not a debauchee.

⁸¹Augustine's "actual sexual activity was not shocking by any standards but those of a saint," writes Wills (xvii), slightly overstating the point. In *Augustine and Sexuality* Brown repudiates the notion of Augustine as an "ex-profligate" (1-3), and Hugo, too, rejects viewing Augustine as a "converted rake" (171-76).

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